

Mexican Migrant Workers in Southern Illinois

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Have you ever walked into a grocery store in the fall and picked out a crisp newly picked apple? You may not think that even if the apple was picked in Illinois the hands that picked it might not have come from this country. In southern Illinois Mexican immigrants pick much of the fruit.

Mexican immigrants started arriving there in the early 1940s. Most of them settled in Cobden or Anna. Immigrant workers were needed because most of the men that had been doing the work went to fight in World War II. The government had called for workers and the Mexican immigrants answered the call and came to fill in the positions. During January 1944, more than a thousand workers came to southern Illinois. By 1970 there were 117,268 Mexicans in Illinois. This was the largest number of Mexicans in the Midwest.

The main job that these immigrants were able to get was picking fruit. Most of the food that the migrants picked was apples, peaches, vegetables, and strawberries. The work day started at 6:00 A.M. and continued throughout the entire day. The income for a family was only about \$1,100 a year. The children also worked in the strawberry fields picking strawberries. On the average every child age eight or over picked about 12,349 quarts of strawberries per season.

The migrant workers did not have very good living conditions. There were four main reasons for this. Most jobs only lasted for one or two weeks. The employers did not spend very much on housing their workers because of the short time that they worked at that place. Also, if the farmers had spent lots of money on housing, the cost per day would have been much higher. Thus, the workers would have earned a lot less money. As a result, they would not have had

enough money for other things that they needed such as food, health care, clothing, and education for their children that were younger than eight years old and not yet working. Fruit growing is also a highly competitive type of agriculture. This may have made the farmers spend less on housing and more on crops.

A third possible reason is that the migrant laborers did not demand good housing. They also did not complain about it to their employers. This suggests that they did not have good housing in their home communities, or that they were afraid that if they complained that they would lose their jobs. Lastly, migrant workers did not take very good care of their accommodations if the farmers provided it, suggesting that they did not really care. They might have not cared about the property because they were only living on it for a short time and they might not have considered it theirs to take care of. It might also have meant that they took what they got and did not want to waste time fixing it up if they were going to leave it and go somewhere else. They also might not have wanted to waste time on their housing so that they could go to work and earn money instead. It was also possible that the migrants were too tired from working dawn to dusk every day to even think about their housing.

Most of the migrant laborers did not get a very good education. Most children only completed the sixth grade before beginning to work on the farms. Many of the children did not attend school at all. This means that none of the migrants had a chance to better themselves or possibly go into a better paying occupation. It is possible that, because of having a bad education, the adults did not think that their children needed to get much of an education or any education at all. This is probably why few of the children thought of going into careers other than picking fruit.

[From Jane H. Adams, *The Transformation of Rural Social Life in Union County, Illinois in the Twentieth Century*; Melvin S. Brooks, *The Social Problems of Migrant Farm Laborers*; *The Daily Egyptian*, Aug. 27, 2001; Alison Guernsey, "Migrant Labor in Southern Illinois," *Illinois History*, Dec. 1997.]